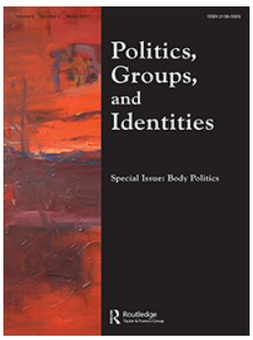

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Transgender politics as body politics: effects of disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism on transgender rights attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Transgender identity inherently involves body politics, specifically how transgender people may physically represent gender in ways that do not match their assigned sex at birth and how some may alter their bodies. Yet, political behavior research on transgender rights attitudes leaves unaddressed the role of transgender bodies in shaping those attitudes. Using an original, representative national survey of American adults, we analyze how authoritarianism and disgust sensitivity affect transgender rights attitudes. These two predispositions often reflect social norms and morality about bodies, especially those of stigmatized minority groups. First, we show that attitudes about transgender rights are multidimensional, forming civil rights and body-centric dimensions. Second, we demonstrate that disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism both positively predict opposition to transgender rights, and that they moderate each other's effects such that the greatest opposition is among those jointly scoring higher on both predictors. Finally, we show that disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism predict greater than average opposition to body-centric transgender rights policies.

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Authoritarianism; body politics; disgust; LGBT; transgender

In November 2015, Houston voters rejected Proposition 1, the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO). It proposed outlawing various forms of discrimination in the city based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Moyer 2015). Opponents dubbed it the "bathroom ordinance" and adopted the slogan "no men in women's bathrooms," an antagonistic reference to transgender individuals. The Campaign for Houston, a leading proposition opponent, aired radio ads repeating this bathroom attack and calling HERO "filthy," "disgusting," and "unsafe" (Wright 2015). Opponents also attacked HERO for supposedly upending gender lines and promoting immorality (Morris and Driessen 2015), pitting HERO against traditional norms.

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HERO opponents likely perceived it advantageous to deploy messages involving disgust and social traditionalism, and to tie those messages to transgender bodies, perhaps believing that these sentiments resonated with how voters thought about the issue. However, given data limitations, current empirical research on transgender rights attitudes (e.g., Flores 2015; Norton and Herek 2013) gives little insight into what psychological dynamics – disgust, traditionalism, or otherwise – shape American attitudes on those issues. Indeed, the limited body of empirical studies specifically on transgender rights opinions scarcely goes beyond studying basic demographic and partisanship correlates of those attitudes.

Our research fills this gap by examining American attitudes on transgender rights, paying particular attention to psychological dynamics that may involve perceptions of transgender bodies. Given how the term "transgender" is commonly used in social discourse, average citizens likely associate that concept with the body, both how gender is presented via the body and how some transgender persons alter their bodies. First, we show that transgender rights attitudes are multidimensional, including a dimension that covers traditional civil rights debates and another dimension that deals with policies that we term "body-centric." By body-centric, we mean policies that involve how transgender people represent gender or gender roles with their bodies or how some transgender people employ medical interventions such as hormone therapy or surgery to change their bodies. Second, we demonstrate that disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism – both associated with traditional morality and body perceptions – influence those attitudes, and moderate each other's effects. Finally, we show that Americans are less supportive of transgender rights issues that are body-centric rather than traditional civil rights questions, and that disgust and authoritarianism partly explain that support differential.

Transgender politics as body politics

"Transgender" is often used as an umbrella term encompassing numerous subgroups: gender dysphoric individuals with psychological identities as male or female that are opposite of their sex assigned at birth, transsexual persons who seek medical intervention to alter their bodies, the genderqueer, two-spirited, drag queens, drag kings, and transvestites, among others (Tadlock 2015). Our goal is neither to adjudicate the "correct" usage of transgender nor to explore the complexities of transgender identity. Rather, we simply recognize that it is a broad, multi-faceted term encompassing substantial diversity.

It is unclear from research exactly how Americans understand the term "transgender." Many Americans may see transgender as primarily referring to transsexuals given their prominence in popular culture (Tadlock 2015). For many, transgender may lack precise definition given the breadth that it encompasses. Indeed, many individuals may not distinguish between distinct subgroups commonly labeled as transgender – for example, someone assigned male at birth who identifies as female or dresses in a feminine manner without altering their body versus someone assigned male at birth who undergoes hormone therapy or sex reassignment surgery. Most Americans may perceive both individuals as transgender without considering closely how gender expression via the body or the body itself differentiate subgroups.

A Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) survey reinforces that Americans may indeed perceive "transgender" broadly (PRRI 2011), connecting the concept to both body self-presentation and physical alteration. Respondents recognizing the term – 91%

– were asked in an open-ended question to explain it. PRRI categorized the largest share of responses – 46% – as defining transgender as "someone who switches from one gender to another." It is unclear, however, whether this means switching gender presentation via dress or name, or switching physically via hormone therapy or surgery. Most Americans do not fully grasp the sex-gender difference and use the two terms interchangeably (Fausto-Sterling 2012), so the meaning of "switching" here is open to interpretation. Ten percent of respondents defined transgender as "born in the wrong sex" or "wrong body," and 20% as relating to gender identification or "living like" the opposite gender.

The breadth of how transgender is understood is likely important for assessing how individuals think about transgender rights. This may especially be true to the extent that those issues relate to "body politics," meaning how the body becomes a politicized object in power struggles over policies and practices that regulate it (Waylen et al. 2013), sometimes as an object for biological regulation, a target of political violence, or an object whose presentation through dress or the visible match of gender roles and sex is contested. Political behavior research has established in numerous contexts that understandings and perceptions of groups fundamentally shape how individuals evaluate policies related to those groups (for review: Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje 1999). We must consider, then, that given the common understandings of what transgender means to Americans, that an ingredient in transgender rights attitudes is perceptions of the body, both how some transgender people *present* their bodies and how other transgender people *alter* their bodies. Consequently, attitudes toward transgender rights may partly reflect body politics.

The concept of body presentation captures how individuals perceive and label transgender people who may present their gender in varying and sometimes gender non-binary ways that do not necessarily conform to their assigned sex at birth. For many, perceptions of transgender people likely often boil down to labeling their gender as either male or female and navigating how that perception matches the body. Assuredly, for some individuals, navigating that match invites no negativity. But for some, discomfort with transgender people may stem from expectancy violations related to gender ambiguity, eliciting disapproval of those who appear male but do not conform to "masculine" self-presentation expectations, or who appear female but do not conform to "feminine" standards (Miller and Grollman 2015).

Given the common understanding of transgender, these body-relevant perceptions may also include feelings about how others may alter their bodies physically. Americans likely vary in their comfort with the notion of transforming one's body via hormone therapy or sex reassignment surgery, often in lay-language called "sex change" surgery. Some persons assuredly hold more laissez-faire attitudes about these alterations and defer to transgender persons' autonomy to govern their bodies as they choose. Others likely view such body changes as unnecessary or problematic mutilations that violate norms of what is moral or natural (Raymond 1979), perhaps even reacting with emotions like fear or disgust.

However, given current research into transgender rights attitudes, there is little empirical evidence about how reactions to transgender bodies shape those attitudes. Quantitative research on this topic is scant (e.g., Flores 2015; Norton and Herek 2013). The few studies outline basic demographic and partisan cleavages in transgender rights attitudes, but due to limited data provide less insight into psychological factors that might channel reactions to transgender bodies. Here, we explore two such factors – disgust sensitivity and

authoritarianism – that can broaden our understanding of transgender rights opinions, especially as they relate to body politics.

Disgust and transgender rights attitudes

Fundamentally, it is useful to know the demographic and political predictors of transgender rights attitudes. Flores (2015) shows that Republicans, biblical literalists, African-Americans, men, older people, and those not knowing transgender people are all less supportive of those rights. Existing theory, however, provides few clear narratives linking these correlates to perceptions of transgender bodies. For example, Republicans or older Americans may be less favorable toward transgender rights, but there is no clear psychological rationale for why those effects might reflect considerations of body politics. Integrating more psychological variables into this nascent research, though, can make those theoretical connections.

Emotions such as disgust may link reactions to transgender bodies – both how they are presented or altered – to transgender rights opinions. Disgust is "experienced in response to repulsive objects" (Schirmer 2013, 599), often stimuli that threaten contamination or body boundary violations (Rozin, Lowery, and Ebert 1994). Disgust allows subjective interpretation and social construction to influence emotional reactions. Piercings or body tattoos, for example, may be offensive because of an individual's personal tastes or dominant societal norms, but not induce disgust reactions for others.

Social psychology research has expanded on this notion of disgust as socially engineered, positing that for some it is a "behavioral immune system" (Schaller and Duncan 2007). This protection mechanism reacts both to stimuli viewed as physically infectious and those deemed morally contaminating (Haidt et al. 1997; Hodson and Costello 2007; Horberg et al. 2009; Miller 1997). Applied to attitudes toward social groups, the behavioral immune system generally elicits ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation, a bias powerfully applied when the targeted outgroup is a stigmatized or relatively powerless minority (Faulkner et al. 2004; Navarette and Fessler 2006; Park, Faulkner, and Schaller 2003; Park, Schaller, and Crandall 2007; Schaller and Duncan 2007).

Importantly, disgust exists in both emotional state and trait forms (Spielberger 1972; Woody and Tolin 2002). State disgust means reactions to particular stimuli. This conceptualization matches cognitive-based appraisal models of emotion common in political behavior analyses (for review: Miller 2011) in which survey respondents are asked if certain attitude objects elicit particular emotions. However, a drawback of state assessments is that reported discrete emotions may actually reflect simple affect toward attitude objects rather than unique emotional states. Conversely, disgust trait analyses treat the emotion as a generic aversion to disgust-relevant objects. This trait is a relatively stable disposition over time, and predicts both disgust reactivity to myriad aversive stimuli and willingness to engage in disgust-inducing activities (Haidt, McCauley, and Rozin 1994; Olatunji 2008; Olatunji and Sawchuk 2005). We adopt the trait conceptualization of disgust, though this approach to emotion is less standard in political science than in psychology (exception: Miller and Conover 2015). This choice avoids problematic conceptual overlap between reported emotions and policy attitudes possible with a state approach. It also allows greater comparability to social psychology studies on disgust and gay rights that almost universally adopt the trait approach.

Among the groups under the LGBT umbrella, research has mostly linked disgust to gays and lesbians. Disgust sensitivity negatively predicts openness on sociosexual norms applicable to gays and lesbians (Druschel and Sherman 1999). Haidt (2001) argues that disgust is especially powerful in attitudes toward gays and lesbians because it activates "moral intuitions," moral judgments stemming from strong gut feelings of right versus wrong that are often deeply ingrained through socialization and that humans may find difficult verbally rationalizing. Thus, if social norms dictate that homosexuality is morally wrong, individuals who have long accepted that norm may feel disgust toward gays and lesbians both because of what they may do sexually and because their sexual orientations are seen as contaminating deeply held moral beliefs.

In affecting attitudes toward groups, disgust shifts moral judgments toward politically conservative positions, especially when social traditionalism is jeopardized (Haidt and Hersh 2001; Hodson and Costello 2007; Inbar et al. 2009; Olatunji 2008). Again, research on attitudes toward gays and lesbians may help link disgust to transgender persons. Disgust sensitivity positively predicts many forms of prejudice toward gays and lesbians (Dasgupta et al. 2009; Inbar et al. 2009; Olatunji 2008; Terrizzi, Shook, and Ventis 2010). Its effects also extend into policy attitudes. Those having stronger disgust orientations are less likely to support same-sex marriage (Adams, Stewart, and Blanchar 2014; Haidt and Hersh 2001; Inbar et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2011), controlling for other political orientations.

The theory underlying disgust suggests that it could channel reactions to transgender bodies into policy preferences, though little empirical work explores any connection between disgust and transgender rights opinions (exception: Casey 2016). Much like gays and lesbians whose bodies often defy old-fashioned gender roles and sexual standards, transgender people challenge traditional body norms derived from conservative moral principles, perhaps threatening moral intuitions about gender roles and body appropriateness akin to Haidt (2001). Individuals with stronger disgust dispositions may have more adverse reactions to transgender people who challenge body norms by displaying gender on their bodies – dress, makeup, or hair, for example – in ways that do not match their sex assigned at birth. Likewise, those strongly oriented toward disgust may react negatively to perceived body norm challenges from those who alter their bodies via hormone therapy or surgery. And given the literature on disgust and outgroup attitudes, disgust may be especially potent in this context given that transgender people are a relatively stigmatized minority group. *Thus, we expect that those with greater disgust sensitivity will be more strongly opposed to transgender rights policies* (H1).

Authoritarianism and transgender rights attitudes

Authoritarianism is a second psychological factor that may influence transgender rights opinions by channeling reactions to transgender bodies into policy preferences. Scholarship on authoritarianism is diverse and disjointed. There is no academic consensus on a single definition for the concept since it is often treated in behavioral analyses as an umbrella term encompassing numerous "authoritarian" traits. Many scholars have treated authoritarianism as a personality type, focusing on its negative, borderline pathological effects on behavior (e.g., Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1981; Stenner 2005). Recently, American politics scholars have deviated from pejorative treatments of

authoritarianism, refashioning it as a disposition that most individuals possess to a degree, and that when activated powerfully affects political attitudes and behavior (for review: Hetherington and Weiler 2009).

Higher authoritarians possess several core characteristics relevant to applying the concept to transgender rights. First, they have greater need for order, seeing "the world in more concrete, black and white terms" (Hetherington and Weiler 2009, 3; also Altemeyer 1996; Stenner 2005). Conversely, lower authoritarians are more comfortable with ambiguity and complex evaluations. Second, higher authoritarians perceive stronger boundaries between ingroups and outgroups (Hetherington and Weiler 2009), suggesting a stronger tendency to emphasize group membership and attributions in attitude formation. Third, higher authoritarians place greater value on conforming to traditional social norms, and tend to perceive those norms as threatened by stigmatized and relatively less powerful minority groups (Altemeyer 1996; Stenner 2005). Lower authoritarians, however, tend to emphasize personal autonomy over social convention.

Authoritarianism positively predicts antagonism toward rights for minority groups, including gays and lesbians (Barker and Tinnick 2006; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Laythe, Finkel, and Kirkpatrick 2001; Peterson, Doty, and Winter 1993). Scholars have argued that higher authoritarians value traditional gender roles and sexual norms, and that these attachments manifest in more conservative attitudes toward regulating bodies of minority groups (Adorno et al. 1950; Kelley 1985; Larsen and Long 1988; Rios 2013; Sales 1973; Whitley and Aegisdóttir 2000) – abortion, dress codes for women, or sodomy laws, for example. Lower authoritarians, conversely, emphasize greater fairness in dealing with outgroups while valuing social traditionalism less, pushing them toward politically liberal attitudes in evaluating minority rights.

Authoritarianism has a plausible connection to attitudes about transgender rights given these outgroup prejudice findings; indeed, Norton and Herek (2013) relatedly find that it predicts simple affect toward transgender people. Higher authoritarians may perceive transgender people as threatening traditional gender and body norms, in both how some present their gender and how others may alter their bodies. In defense of those norms, authoritarian predispositions may activate, inclining higher authoritarians toward more conservative transgender rights preferences. Lower authoritarians may conversely take more liberal policy positions, possibly viewing transgender people as less threatening to traditional norms, valuing those norms less in the first place, and being more apt to apply fairness norms to their political evaluations. *Thus, we expect that greater authoritarianism corresponds to greater opposition to transgender rights* (H2).

Further, authoritarianism and disgust sensitivity may interact, conditioning each other's effects on transgender rights attitudes. Hetherington and Weiler (2009) posit that the greater threat that higher authoritarians perceive from the social world discourages them from engaging in more complex cognition, making them rely more on emotion than lower authoritarians in attitude formation. This may be especially true for authoritarians and disgust. Adorno et al. (1950) describe moral disgust at "deviant" outgroups as central to the authoritarian personality, driving both the dehumanization of "others" and social antagonism toward minority populations (also: Hancock 2004). Social psychology research also suggests a moderating link between disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism in political contexts (Brenner and Inbar 2015; Hodson et al. 2013). *Thus, we expect that disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism demonstrate a*

moderated effect on transgender rights attitudes (H3). We expect a statistical interaction such that those jointly expressing the highest levels of disgust sensitivity *and* authoritarianism should possess the most negative attitudes toward those rights. Conversely, those scoring lowest in *both* disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism should have the most positive attitudes on transgender rights.

Data

Data for this study are from an original nationally representative survey of 1020 American adults conducted by GfK. Data collection occurred October 9–11, 2015. The survey uses an online probability sample derived from address-based sampling to overcome coverage bias issues common in telephone-based polling. Selected respondents in non-Internet households are provided a laptop computer and online access to encourage participation. This sample also differs from those of many online survey providers since respondents do not opt-in to the panel, reducing demographic and political biases common in samples from other firms. All analyses herein employ weights compensating for demographic non-response. Missing data values were estimated via multiple imputation rather than allowing for listwise deletion which systematically biases data analyses.

Measures

Transgender policy attitudes

The survey included 14 statements covering various transgender rights policy sentiments. For each question, respondents rated how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement on a five-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" with a neutral "neither agree nor disagree" midpoint. These statements were modeled on similar survey items on gay or transgender rights when possible, drawing on the General Social Survey, American National Election Studies (ANES), and the 2011 PRRI survey cited earlier.

We demonstrate below using principal components analysis that these 14 statements show dimensionality on a two-factor solution. The first dimension is termed "civil rights," and the second "body-centric," recalling our earlier definition of this term. Each statement is recoded on a ±2 scale, such that +2 indicates the greatest support of transgender rights and –2 the most opposition, with zero indicating neutrality. Policy statements are then combined into two additive scales based on their greatest factor loading along the two dimensions. On the scales, positive scores denote net support for transgender rights, and negative scores net opposition (civil rights scale: $\alpha = .90$, scored ± 14; body-centric scale: $\alpha = .92$, scored ± 14). On the civil rights scale, 24.71% of respondents have negative scores, 8.14% neutral, and 67.15% positive. For the body-centric dimension, 55.69% have negative scale values, 6.76% neutral, and 37.55% positive.

Authoritarianism

We employ the standard authoritarianism battery used in the ANES since 1992. Each question in this four-item scale poses two traits to respondents, who then choose which

is "more important for a child to have." Listing authoritarian traits first, the four choices include: "respect for elders" versus "independence," "good manners" versus "curiosity," "obedience" versus "self-reliance," and "well behaved" versus "being considerate." The four questions are then combined into an additive index indicating how many authoritarian traits respondents preferred, with higher values indicating greater authoritarian dispositions (scored 0–4; $\alpha = .62$). Table 1 provides descriptive statistics and correlations of variables used in analyses. Though numerous authoritarianism measurement schemes exist, the child-rearing scale reflects core authoritarian sentiments, correlates highly with alternative measures, and significantly affects many political attitudes in the American context (Hetherington and Weiler 2009).

Disgust sensitivity

The survey included three questions from the 25-item disgust sensitivity scale (Haidt, McCauley, and Rozin 1994; Olatunji 2008). The longer battery measures variation in the tendency to feel disgusted across three dimensions: core disgust, contamination disgust, and animal-reminder disgust. All three dimensions correlate similarly with political behavior variables, including gay rights attitudes, so they are commonly combined into one scale in such analyses (Inbar et al. 2009; Terrizzi, Shook, and Ventis 2010).

The three-item subset comes from the contamination disgust dimension. Respondents evaluated how much they felt the three disgust statements accurately described them. Responses were on four-point scales ranging from "not like me" to "extremely like me." The three statements included: (1) "I never let any part of my body touch the toilet seat in a public washroom," (2) "I probably would not go to my favorite restaurant if I found out that the cook had a cold," and (3) "I use hand sanitizer on a daily basis." Responses were then combined into an additive scale, with higher values indicating greater disgust sensitivity (scored 0–9; $\alpha = .66$).

Controls

All models included standard demographic controls, including: age in years, church attendance (1/"never" to 6/"more than once a week"), education level (1/"less than high school graduate" to 7/"professional or doctorate degree"), LGBT (0/non-LGBT, 1/LGBT), household income (1/"less than $5000 annually" to 19/"$175,000 or more annually"), race (0/non-white, 1/white), and sex (0/male, 1/female). Also included were ideology (1/"very liberal" to 7/"very conservative") and partisanship (1/"strong Democrat" to 7/"strong Republican") measured via the standard ANES scales.

Results

Structure of transgender policy attitudes

Before testing our hypotheses, we first explore respondent attitudes on the policy statements that form our dependent variables. Table 2 provides the transgender rights question wordings. Responses are recoded into three categories: *supportive* positions favoring transgender rights, *opposed* positions against those rights, and *neutral* responses. Rights

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations for survey variables ($N = 1020$).

			r											
Measure	M	SD	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Civil Rights Issues	3.57	6.45	.75	−.08	−.24	.16	.10	.17	.10	−.01	−.48	.42	−.31	−.17
2. Body Issues	−1.65	7.26		−.13	.33	.16	.09	.18	.08	−.01	−.53	.44	−.39	−.21
3. Age	46.02	16.71			.13	−.06	−.06	−.09	.03	.16	.11	−.07	.05	−.10
4. Church attendance	1.93	1.70				.03	.05	−.09	−.03	.02	.32	−.29	.22	.05
5. Education	3.61	1.63					−.02	−.02	.44	.05	−.06	.05	−.32	−.10
6. Female	0.51	0.50						−.04	−.06	−.01	−.08	.05	.04	.12
7. LGBT	0.04	0.20							−.07	−.06	−.13	.14	−.03	−.02
8. Income	12.38	4.37								.17	−.01	−.04	−.25	−.14
9. White	0.73	0.44									.10	−.26	−.11	−.21
10. Ideology	4.16	1.53										−.60	.28	.02
11. Partisanship	4.11	2.06											−.19	.03
12. Authoritarianism	2.17	1.31												.17
13. Disgust	3.33	2.57												

Table 2. Respondent attitudes on transgender rights statements.

	Respondent attitudes (%)			Principal components analysis	
Statement	Supportive	Neutral	Opposed	Civil rights dimension	Body-centric dimension
Transgender people deserve the same rights and protections as other Americans	63.53	27.84	8.63	0.77	0.22
Laws should protect transgender children from bullying in schools	61.27	28.04	10.69	0.79	0.05
Legal protections that apply to gay and lesbian people should also apply to transgender people	56.87	31.37	11.76	0.74	0.29
Laws to prevent employment discrimination against transgender people	50.59	30.88	18.53	0.67	0.37
Congress should pass laws to protect transgender people from job discrimination	47.65	33.92	18.43	0.77	0.33
Congress should pass laws to protect transgender people from discrimination in public accommodations like restaurants and movie theaters	45.1	33.82	21.08	0.77	0.33
Allowing transgender people to serve openly in the military	41.27	34.12	24.61	0.77	0.33
Allowing transgender people to change the sex listed on their driver's license or state ID card	37.94	33.43	28.63	0.52	0.66
Allowing transgender people to adopt children	37.26	35.29	27.45	0.57	0.63
Allowing transgender people to use public restrooms that are consistent with the way that they express their gender	32.65	31.86	35.49	0.51	0.66
Allowing students who have had a sex change to play college sports as a member of their current gender	31.66	33.63	34.71	0.42	0.67
Insurance companies should not be required to pay for medical treatment related to transgender health issues	29.61	33.14	37.25	0.26	0.67
Allowing Medicare to pay for a transgender person's hormone therapy	14.41	26.18	59.41	0.17	0.89
Allowing Medicare to pay for a transgender person's sex change surgery	12.25	24.71	63.04	0.13	0.89

statements are ordered from those where respondents express the most supportive positions to those where they are least supportive.

Respondents are divided in terms of which transgender rights positions they support in aggregate, though by at least a plurality the supportive position is the largest category for 9 of 14 statements. The sentiments generally garnering the most support cover many of the same civil rights questions that have been part of public dialogue around gays and lesbians. Majorities agree that "transgender people deserve the same rights and protections as other Americans" and that "legal protections that apply to gay and lesbian people should also apply to transgender people." Majorities also support specific policies on school bullying and employment discrimination. Pluralities support protection in public accommodations and open military service, plus adoption rights even though this issue also taps sentiments about proper gender roles[1] (Brewer 2008). A plurality also supports allowing transgender people to change the sex listed on their government-issued identity cards – an issue specific to some transgender persons.

Conversely, respondents on balance – excepting the identity card question – oppose policies that deal with the body, both how it is used to express gender and how some transgender people change it. Though opinion is closely divided, pluralities oppose two gender expression policies: allowing transgender people to use bathrooms of their choice and to

play on sports teams consistent with their gender identities. This may reflect a discomfort among some for encountering transgender bodies in situations where sex and gender do not necessarily match, or even a more fundamental distaste for such mismatches. A plurality also agrees that "insurance companies should not be required to pay for medical treatment related to transgender health issues," a policy that may suggest body alteration to some given Tadlock's (2015) point on the prominence of transsexuals in public discourse about transgender people. Relatedly, majorities oppose allowing Medicare to pay for hormone therapy or sex change surgery, the two policies most clearly dealing with body alteration.

The disparity in support for particular transgender rights suggests that attitudes on these issues are multidimensional, a proposition unexamined in current published research. Rather than thinking of transgender rights questions monolithically, Americans may distinguish between policies that deal with long-contested civil rights questions versus policies that are more body-centric – both how gender is presented via the body and how the body is altered.

Table 2 also shows principal components analysis on the 14 transgender rights statements. Entries are rotated factor loadings. Shading indicates on which dimension each policy item predominantly loads. The analysis yields two dimensions with eigenvalues larger than the standard 1.00 cutoff.[2] The first dimension we term the "civil rights dimension." It encompasses most of the policy attitudes related to core questions of legal equality that have characterized the gay rights debate: public accommodations, bullying, employment nondiscrimination, deserving the same rights as other Americans and gays and lesbians, and military service. The second dimension we term the "body-centric dimension." It covers the policy attitudes related more to body alteration and expressing gender through the body, including issues dealing with gender roles: Medicare payments, transgender health issues, restroom and sports team choice, sex listing on identity cards, and parenthood via adoption.

Given evidence of dimensionality, in subsequent hypothesis testing we use the additive scales described in the methods section as the dependent variables.[3] The means of the two dimensions show that in aggregate respondents score significantly lower on the body-centric dimension than the civil rights dimension [$t(1019) = 34.10$, $p = .00$]. The 3.57 mean on the civil rights scale indicates that the sample on balance is supportive of transgender rights on these questions, though not overwhelmingly so given the +14 maximum possible score. Conversely, the −1.65 mean on the body-centric dimension shows that respondents in aggregate hold attitudes somewhat opposed to policies relating to gender expression via the body and body alteration.

Disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism direct effects

Table 3 presents results for ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models testing H1–H3 regarding the effects of disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism, plus their interaction. Positive coefficients indicate that higher independent variable values predict supportive attitudes on transgender rights, whereas negative coefficients mean that higher predictor values are associated with opposition to those rights.

Model 1 under each dependent variable tests a basic model of demographics and political dispositions – roughly the extent of current academic knowledge of the correlates of transgender rights attitudes. For both issue dimensions, this basic model yields numerous

Table 3. Respondent placement on transgender policy scale dimensions.

	Civil rights dimension				Body-centric dimension			
	Model 1	Model 2		Model 3	Model 1	Model 2		Model 3
	β	*β*	*b*	*β*	*β*	*β*	*b*	*β*
Age	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.02 (0.01)	−0.04	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.03** (0.01)	−0.04** (0.01)	−0.09	−0.03** (0.01)
Church attendance	−0.03* (0.12)	−0.16 (0.12)	−0.04	−0.15 (0.12)	−0.67*** (0.13)	−0.50*** (0.12)	−0.12	−0.49*** (0.12)
Education	0.39** (0.12)	0.23+ (0.12)	0.06	0.24+ (0.12)	0.47*** (0.13)	0.21+ (0.13)	0.05	0.23+ (0.13)
Female	1.02** (0.37)	1.25*** (0.36)	0.10	1.24*** (0.36)	0.98* (0.39)	1.32*** (0.37)	0.09	1.31*** (0.37)
LGBT	3.48*** (0.89)	3.27*** (0.82)	0.11	3.24*** (0.84)	3.22** (1.13)	2.92** (1.09)	0.09	2.88** (1.09)
Income	0.13** (0.05)	0.09+ (0.05)	0.07	0.09+ (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	0.01	0.01 (0.05)
White	1.21** (0.44)	0.61 (0.43)	0.05	0.63 (0.43)	1.60** (0.48)	0.80 (0.46)	0.05	0.72 (0.45)
Ideology	−1.23*** (0.14)	−1.09*** (0.14)	−0.26	−1.08*** (0.14)	−1.47*** (0.17)	−1.23*** (0.16)	−0.26	−1.22*** (0.16)
Partisanship	−0.62*** (0.11)	−0.63*** (0.11)	−0.20	−0.65*** (0.11)	−0.62*** (0.13)	−0.64*** (0.12)	−0.19	−0.66*** (0.12)
Authoritarianism	–	−0.66*** (0.15)	−0.14	−0.19 (0.21)	–	−1.13*** (0.16)	−0.21	−0.63** (0.23)
Disgust	–	−0.36*** (0.07)	−0.15	−0.01 (0.14)	–	−0.45*** (0.08)	−0.19	−0.13 (0.16)
Authoritarianism × disgust	–	–	–	−0.14** (0.05)	–	–	–	−0.15** (0.06)
Constant	2.75* (1.29)	5.97*** (1.32)	–	4.66** (1.42)	0.34 (1.42)	5.34*** (1.34)	–	3.94** (1.45)
Adjusted R^2	0.28	0.315		0.32	0.33	0.40		0.41
F	45.02***	42.60***		39.58***	56.05***	69.89***		64.36***
N	1020	1020		1020	1020	1020		1020

Notes: *β* are weighted unstandardized OLS coefficients; *b* are standardized coefficients; SE in parentheses; models 1 and 2 were recomputed using weighted SUR OLS; statistically significant differences in row coefficients from SUR are underlined.

+$p < .1$.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

statistically significant effects, indicating substantial cleavages in opinion on transgender rights along demographic and political lines. Under the civil rights dimension, every predictor except age is significant. Attending religious services more frequently, being more conservative, and identifying as closer to the Republican Party all predict greater opposition to transgender rights on this dimension. Those with higher education and household income levels, women, LGBT identifiers, and whites are all more supportive of transgender civil rights. Model 1 under the body-centric scale produces similar results, except for income now being statistically insignificant and age becoming a significant predictor, with older respondents less supportive of transgender rights on this dimension.

Model 1 was then recalculated for both dependent variables using seemingly unrelated regression (SUR; not reported). SUR yielded neither substantially different coefficient sizes from regular OLS nor any changes in statistical significance from those reported in Table 3. However, SUR allowed easy testing for significant differences in the sizes of any one coefficient across dependent variables using chi-squared tests. Underlined entries indicate significant differences in row coefficients across both Model 1 columns. Age and church attendance have significantly larger effects on body-centric dimension attitudes than on civil rights attitudes, whereas income more strongly predicts the civil rights dimension. All other predictors have statistically similar effects comparing Model 1 under both policy dimensions.

This simple model adds to the scant empirical literature on transgender rights attitudes. The pattern of statistically significant demographic and political variables that we report resembles Flores (2015), though he found some of these predictors to have null effects in the 2011 PRRI survey. However, our model does not perfectly mimic his variables, so precise comparability is impossible. Additionally, we cannot ascertain whether new attitudinal cleavages emerged in American public opinion on transgender rights in the four years between the PRRI survey and ours. Nonetheless, Model 1 provides a baseline for assessing how incorporating more psychological variables into the model – disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism – adds explanatory power to our current limited knowledge of opinion dynamics on this topic.

Model 2 under each dimension adds disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism as independent variables. For the civil rights scale, both new predictors yield statistically significant effects. Compared to respondents scoring at the minimum value on authoritarianism, those at the maximum value are a predicted 2.63 units less supportive of transgender rights on this dimension. For disgust, those scoring at the maximum value are 3.20 units less supportive on the civil rights scale than respondents at the minimum.

However, the standardized coefficients under Model 2 for the civil rights dimension show that neither new predictor surpasses ideology or partisanship in substantive effects on the dependent variable per 1SD predictor value changes. Very conservative respondents place 6.52 units lower on the civil rights scale than the very liberal, whereas strong Republicans score 3.77 units lower than strong Democrats. Nonetheless, adding disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism as predictors improves the model fit for the civil rights dimension as the adjusted-R^2 in Model 2 increases 13.31% from Model 1.

Model 2 for the body-centric dimension produces similar results. Moving from the minimum to maximum values of authoritarianism and disgust sensitivity yields, respectively, 4.50 and 4.48 unit declines in support for transgender rights policies relating to the body. Per the Model 2 standardized coefficients under the body-centric dimension,

ideology is again the predictor with the greatest substantive effect per 1SD change, though the partisanship effect approximates those of authoritarianism and disgust. And again, the model fit for this dimension improves substantially – 22.25% – by adding authoritarianism and disgust. Thus, the data support H1 and H2 that authoritarianism and disgust sensitivity positively predict opposition to transgender rights.

SUR chi-squared tests indicate that authoritarianism and disgust sensitivity have significantly larger effects on body-centric attitudes than civil rights attitudes. This pattern makes intuitive sense given research discussed earlier detailing how these two predispositions may be especially potent influences when body regulation is concerned. They predict opposition to civil rights for transgender persons, but that influence magnifies when body politics is primed.

Disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism interaction

H3 posits that authoritarianism and disgust sensitivity should moderate each other's effects on transgender rights attitudes. Specifically, we argue that those jointly expressing the highest levels of *both* predictors should be the least supportive of transgender rights, whereas those scoring lowest in *both* disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism should be the most supportive. Model 3 under each dependent variable tests H3 by interacting authoritarianism and disgust sensitivity. Both interactions prove statistically significant.

Figure 1 shows the substantive effects of these interactions. The lines show the effect of disgust sensitivity plotted against authoritarianism values along the *x*-axis. Scale values are the product of disgust and authoritarianism both held at their means and ±1SD. Panel A shows predicted civil rights dimension values. The negative effect of disgust sensitivity on civil rights dimension attitudes increases in strength as authoritarianism values also increase. Holding authoritarianism at –1SD from its mean, the net effect of a 2SD increase in disgust is to decrease civil rights support by –0.79 units, from predicted scores of 4.84 (95% CI: 4.77, 5.47) to 4.05 (95% CI: 3.34, 4.77). At the authoritarianism mean, the net decline in support for a 2SD shift in disgust is –1.70 units. At +1SD on authoritarianism, the same disgust effect grows to –2.61 units, decreasing predicted civil rights support from scores of 4.05 (95% CI: 2.13, 4.97) to 1.45 (95% CI: .77, 2.13). This represents a 330% increase in the net effect of a 2SD change in disgust across authoritarianism values.

Thus, while the lowest authoritarians are not immune to the negative effect of disgust sensitivity, they are less responsive to that disposition than higher authoritarians who prove more prone to translate disgust into lower support for transgender rights. Notably, given that all other predictors are conventionally held at their means in this calculation, even respondents who jointly report the highest disgust and authoritarianism values score on the supportive, positive side of the civil rights scale. However, the quarter of respondents on the negative, opposed side of the scale would additionally be characterized as male, heterosexual, more conservative, and closer to Republicans.

Panel B plots the interaction effect on predicted values of the body-centric policy scale, showing generally similar patterns. With authoritarianism at –1SD from its mean, a 2SD increase in disgust sensitivity reduces support for transgender rights policies on this dimension by –1.93 units, from predicted scores of 0.56 (95% CI: –0.14, 1.26) to –1.37 (95% CI: –2.10, –0.65). The decline associated with disgust increases to –2.96 units at

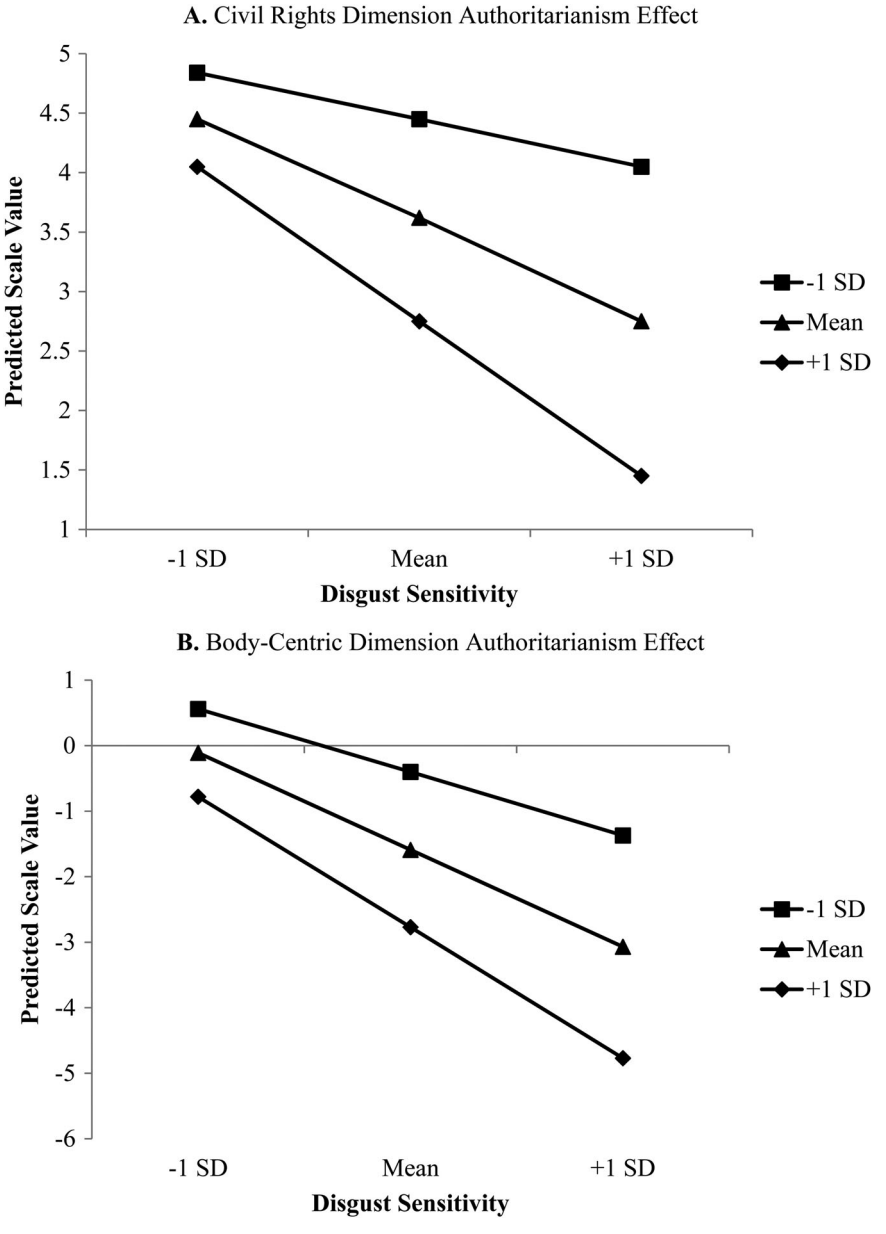

Figure 1. Transgender policy scale attitudes, authoritarianism effect by disgust sensitivity value. (a) Civil rights dimension authoritarianism effect. (b) Body-centric dimension authoritarianism effect.

the authoritarianism mean. Again, the greatest decline in policy support associated with disgust sensitivity occurs at +1SD on authoritarianism, diminishing support by –4.01 units from predicted scores of –0.76 (95% CI: –1.67, 0.11) to –4.77 (95% CI: –5.47, –4.07). This represents a 208% increase in the disgust effect across authoritarianism values. Thus, these moderated effects support H3 that declines in transgender rights support increase as values of disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism jointly increase.

Difference in dimension policy support

Respondents in aggregate are less supportive of transgender rights on the body-centric than the civil rights dimension, evidenced in the significant 5.22 unit difference in the scale means reported above. If Americans differentiate between the types of transgender rights policies they support, then what explains that distinction? Here, we model the difference between respondent support on the two dimensions, calculated as civil rights minus body-centric dimension values (scored ±28; $M = 5.22$, SD = 4.89). The two original scales are scored the same, so their raw difference is directly interpretable as difference in respondent support on the two dimensions. Positive scores indicate that respondents score higher on the civil rights than body-centric dimension, and vice versa for negative scores; 82.16% have positive difference scores.

Table 4 applies Model 2 from Table 3 to predict dimension difference values. Positive coefficients indicate that higher values on predictors increase the difference in respondent scores on the two policy scales, whereas negative values mean reduced differences. Given respondent patterns on the two scales, positive coefficients overwhelmingly mean that respondents score lower on the body-centric scale than average compared to the civil rights scale, thereby increasing their difference between scale support scores.

Though the disgust-authoritarianism interaction is statistically insignificant ($\beta = .01$, $p = .83$), both constituent items yield significant positive coefficients. Moving from the authoritarianism minimum to maximum increases the difference between scale scores by 1.87 units. The same move on disgust sensitivity increases that difference by 1.29 units. Respondents who are older, have higher household incomes, and who attend church more frequently also demonstrate greater scale differences, again largely being less supportive of body-centric policies than other respondents on average. Per the standardized coefficients, authoritarianism rivals church attendance in substantive heft for a 1SD predictor movement, with the other three significant predictors roughly equal in effect. Thus, the difference in support on the two policy dimensions is not a constant,

Table 4. Difference between respondent placement on transgender policy scale dimensions.

	β	b
Age	0.02* (0.01)	0.07
Church attendance	0.34** (0.11)	0.12
Education	0.012 (0.11)	0.01
Female	−0.07 (0.32)	−0.01
LGBT	0.35 (0.98)	0.02
Income	0.08* (0.04)	0.08
White	−0.09 (0.42)	−0.01
Ideology	0.14 (0.14)	0.04
Partisanship	0.01 (0.10)	0.00
Authoritarianism	0.47** (0.15)	0.12
Disgust	0.14* (0.07)	0.08
Constant	0.63 (1.15)	–
Adjusted R^2	0.06	
F	5.78***	
N	1020	

Note: β are weighted unstandardized OLS coefficients; b are standardized coefficients; SE in parentheses.
+$p < .1$.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

but rather a product of certain demographic and psychological orientations associated with relatively lower support on body-centric policies.

Discussion

This study expands our knowledge of opinion dynamics around transgender rights, a timely topic given changes in American popular discourse about transgender people and political developments around policies like HERO. Our research shows that Americans differentiate between transgender rights policies addressing traditional civil rights questions versus those that are more body-centric in nature, and that Americans are more supportive of the former. As hypothesized, disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism dampen support for transgender rights policies, and their effects moderate each other such that their strongest negative influence is among those scoring highly on *both*. Finally, we show that disgust and authoritarianism dispositions are significant factors behind the lower relative support for body-centric transgender rights policies. Thus, attitudes toward transgender rights involve body politics since the body structures those attitudes and brings certain political predispositions to bear on them.

Empirical work on transgender rights attitudes is nascent, and most current research explores little beyond simple demographic and political correlates. A key contribution of our work is showing that psychological factors influence transgender rights policy attitudes – a novel application to this issue area. Indeed, the effects illustrated here may inform broader research on LGBT attitudes. As scholars expand the literature on attitudes toward gays and lesbians, research may well incorporate not just more psychology, but also consider as we do how psychological dynamics interact.

Further development in LGBT rights literature may also address whether the attitudinal dynamics observed here are unique to transgender people, or also apply to gays and lesbians. Opponent messaging in the HERO campaign suggests that body-oriented messages may be effective in campaigning against LGBT rights if those messages can both be framed in terms of transgender people rather than gays and lesbians necessarily, and activate dispositions such as disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism among voters. Essentially, do Americans really lump the "T" with the "LGB" when they evaluate LGBT rights questions, or do they separate the groups? Given the differences in support for transgender rights policies traditionally associated with civil rights debates versus more body-centric policies, the answer might depend on the specific issue.

Relatedly, our research should encourage scholars not to discount the body politics aspect of group-centric politics, especially with transgender rights. For some in the general public, it may be considered taboo or offensive to discuss the bodily aspects of transgender individuals, especially when it involves transgender persons who alter their bodies via hormone therapy or surgery. But our study suggests that, regardless of what some might prefer, these bodily considerations are likely in the minds of average Americans as they think about transgender rights – and their comfort with the body politics of transgender persons will shape their support for transgender rights through psychological mechanisms such as disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism. At a minimum, the body politics of transgender Americans is part of our political dialogue over their rights, as the HERO opponents realized and strategically exploited. If scholars want to understand how the public engages with transgender issues and if real world political practitioners want to

advocate those rights more effectively, then an appreciation of how transgender politics is inherently body politics is vital.

Notes

1. Our survey included a four-item gender role scale. It formed a separate dimension from authoritarianism in principal components analysis. It also exhibited statistically significant effects when included as a predictor in models presented here, but did not substantially attenuate the reported authoritarianism effects. Thus, though authoritarianism may relate to gender roles, it is conceptually and empirically distinct.
2. Given the .75 correlation between the civil rights and body issues scales (Table 1), transgender rights attitudes are multidimensional, but not orthogonal dimensions. The third eigenvalue was .42, and the two reported dimensions cumulatively explained 99% of data variance. Akaike's Information Criterion and Bayesian Information Criterion tests showed that the fit of a two-factor model was statistically better than one factor.
3. Factor scores for the policy dimensions are an alternative to additive scales as dependent variables. Additive scales assign items to dimensions based on loadings, whereas factor scores recognize that items may have non-trivial minority loadings on second dimensions (e.g., military service in Table 2). However, our analyses yield similar results using either additive scales or factor scores as dependent variables. Given the similarity in results, we report models using additive scales since they preserve the substantive interpretability of net transgender rights opinion.

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